DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 036 CS 204 740

AUTHOR	Shaw, Eugene F.
TITLE	Newspaper Reading in Small Towns. ANPA News Research Report No. 12.
INSTITUTION	American Newspaper Publishers Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	9 Jun 78
NOTE	9p.
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Broadcast Industry; Communication (Thought Transfer); Information Dissemination; Journalism; *Media Research; Need Gratification; *News Media; *Newspapers; *Reading Habits; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS	*Audience Response; Small Towns

ABSTRACT

To identify some of the factors underlying varying readership patterns among small town residents, 706 residents from four small towns were interviewed regarding their media preferences. Participants were questioned about their preferences for and access to newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. Additional questions focused on the importance of newspaper content providing information about different types of local news events. The study revealed the following: small town residents rely on the local newspaper for both local and nonlocal news; the local newspaper is not in direct competition with any other news media as a source of public information; the newspaper is rated as superior to television in thoroughness, usefulness, and importance of content, but television is preferred for enjoyment; newspaper readership is strongly related to both locally oriented and politically oriented news; while education and income influence readership, these factors are less significant than the residents' orientation to the media; and the perceived enjoyment and utility of a newspaper are critical factors in determining regular readership and in increasing newspaper circulation. (MAI)

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American Newspaper Publishers Association

ANPA NEWS RESEARCH REPORT

AN ANPA NEWS RESEARCH CENTER STUDY No. 12 June 9, 1978

A REPORT FOR EDITORS PROVIDED IN COORDINATION WITH THE NEWSPAPER READERSHIP COUNCIL

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Newspaper Reading in Small Towns

By Eugene F. Shaw

HIGHLIGHTS: Small-town residents are faithful readers of their local newspaper for local and non-local news. The local newspaper is not in direct competition with other media except possibly with the nearby metropolitan newspaper for in-depth coverage of non-local news. Newspaper readership in small towns is strongly associated with local and political news. The perceived enjoyment and utility of a newspaper are important factors in distinguishing daily from irregular readers—and perhaps critical factors in building readership and circulation. Newspapers should package and sell themselves better, emphasizing their unique benefits.

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Eugene F. Shaw, an associate professor of journalism and communication at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, acknowledges with appreciation the assistance of Dan Sutherland, who served as field director for the study; the cooperation of the staffs of the Maryville-Alcoa Daily Times, the Morristown Citizen Tribune and The Oak Ridger; and the special courtesies extended by Richard D. Smyser, editor of The Oak Ridger, and Dean Stone, managing editor of the Maryville-Alcoa Daily Times

A newspaper in a small town is often in an enviable position. Without local television as news competition, the residents look to the local newspaper, especially if it is a daily, as the chief source of community news. On the other hand, if the town is located near a much larger city, that city's newspapers and its television network news programs are potential alternatives for small-town residents seeking news and information about regional, national and foreign events.

This ANPA report explores the differences between daily readers of newspapers and other residents in four communities in or near the Knoxville, Tenn., metropolitan area, and identifies some of the factors underlying varying readership patterns among small-town residents.

CS204 7402

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Findings in Brief

This study details these findings:

• Small-town residents are faithful newspaper readers, relying heavily on the local newspaper for both local and non-local news.

• The local newspaper is not in direct competition with other news media as a source of public information, except possibly with the nearby metropolitan newspaper for in-depth coverage of non-local news. For residents of small towns, newspapers and television complement each other.

• Small-town residents rate the newspaper as superior to television in thoroughness, usefulness and importance of content; but television is rated over newspapers for general enjoyment and is the preferred medium for substance of content and style.

• Newspaper readership in small towns is strongly associated with both locally oriented and political news. Daily readership is not significantly related to entertainment or advertising content.

• Though education and income are strongly associated with the frequency of newspaper reading, these demographic factors are less decisive in identifying regular readers of newspapers in small towns than are the residents' varied orientations to the media in general and to newspapers in particular.

• The perceived enjoyment and utility of a newspaper as a news and information medium are important factors in distinguishing daily readers from irregular readers—and perhaps critical factors in increasing daily readership and expanding newspaper circulation in small towns.

Methodology

These findings are based on personal interviews with 706 residents 18 years and older of Alcoa, Maryville, Morristown and Oak Ridge, Tenn. The respondents constitute a probability sample of households in those communities.

Varying in size (from under 10,000 to nearly 30,000 people), the four communities were chosen for this study because (1) they are located near or within the same Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area; (2) each has a local daily newspaper; (3) each has at least two local radio stations but is dependent on the nearby large city (Knoxville) for television; (4) they exhibit quite similar patterns on key media-related variables. The analysis reported here is based on combined data from all four towns. Since the towns' demographic compositions and economic bases are somewhat dissimilar, the total sample represents a fairly wide range of small-town life styles.

Table 1

A Media Profile of Small-Town Residents
(N = 706)

	Percent	Percent
NEWSPAPERS		
Household subscription to carrier-delivered newspapers:		84
the town newspaper only	40.1	
state newspaper only	2.4	
town and state newspapers	41.2	
Household subscription to mail-delivered newspapers:		10
state newspapers only	3.7	
out-of-state newspapers only	6.0	
state and out-of-state newspapers	0.7	
Regular readership of newspapers:		87
daily	83.4	
at least three times a week but not daily	4.0	
less than three times a week or not at all	12.6	
Recent readership of newspapers:		95
the town newspaper only	31.6	
a state newspaper only	3.0	
out-of-state newspaper only	0.8	
town and state newspapers	53.0	
town and out-of-state newspapers	1.3	
state and out-of-state newspapers	0.3	
all three types of newspapers	4.7	
MAGAZINES		
Household subscription to at least:		
one type of magazine		67
two different types of magazines		48
one news magazine		16
Regular readership of at least:		
one type of magazine		63
one news magazine		20
RADIO		
Personal ownership of more than:		
one set		67
two sets		43
TELEVISION		
Household ownership of:		
at least one set		98
more than two sets		53
Weekly viewing:		
more than 25 hours		25
less than seven hours		10
at least three local news programs		78
at least three network news programs		80

Media Use in Small Towns

A media profile of small-town residents is presented in Table 1. It shows that the town's newspaper is widely circulated—and read—in the community. Four-fifths of the households report subscribing to it. A newspaper from nearby Knoxville is delivered to more than two-fifths of the homes, but less than three percent subscribe exclusively to it. About 10 percent of the homes receive a newspaper through the mails, mainly weekly or semiweekly out-of-state newspapers from subscribers' former places of residence.

Most households subscribe to at least one newspaper, and most adult residents of small towns occasionally read at least one. Only five percent of those surveyed said they had not read a newspaper in the past week, and they were almost exclusively those unable to read because of either skill or visual deficiencies. More than 90 percent had read the local newspaper; about a third of the sample had read the local newspaper exclusively.

Magazine reading is also popular in small towns. Nevertheless, on an average day, 59 percent of the respondents spend no more than an hour doing any kind of reading—"magazines, book, anything"—even though the sample reported the typical (median) amount of available leisure time to be six hours a day. In contrast, the average amount of television viewing time for these small-town residents is 21 hours a week.

Ratings of Newspaper Content

Table 2 lists the order of importance small-town residents assign to content of their local newspapers.

Even allowing for some inflation of the percentages caused by some respondents giving what they may have thought was a proper rather than an honest answer, the priority assigned to news and information, especially of local origin, is impressive. On the other hand, the readers' expectations of, and apparent need for, varied content are clearly indicated.

Table 2

Importance of Newspaper Content for Small-Town Residents

Rank		Importance: No	Little	Some	Great
		Percent	Percent	Percent	Percent
1.	News, features about local institutions, like schools or hospitals	6	9	44	41
2.	News about national or foreign events	12	7	32	49
3.	Weather information	11	9	34	46
4.	Details about plane crashes, natural disasters or crime	7	13	42	38
5.	Ads about sales at department stores or supermarkets	15	11	36	38
6.	Articles about state or local public officials	12	13	42	33
7.	Editorials or political commentary	14	11	41	34
8.	Announcements about religious or cultural events in town	13	11	45	31
9.5	Accounts of city or county council meetings	17	12	32	39
9.5	Announcements of local births, deaths and marriages	15	13	36	36
11.	Explanation or analysis of national issues	16	11	38	35
12.5	Letters to the editor	19	12	42	27
12.5	Advice columns or features about personal health, hobbies, home repairs, etc.	16	14	47	23
14.	Television schedule or movie listings	19	14	41	26
15.	Classified ads	21	16	36	28
16.	Sports news	31	13	27	29
17.	Business news	29	23	32	16
18.	Society or fashion news	39	19	27	15
19.	Items about the private lives of celebrities	37	25	27	11
20.	Comics and cartoons	41	24	23	12
21.	Crossword puzzles or horoscopes	53	17	21	9

Daily Reading and Content Importance

Seven of the 10 leading content types predict significantly greater daily readership if they are considered of at least some importance to small-town residents. These seven (see Tables 2, 3) either are *locally oriented* or explicitly *political* in nature. Two types—news about area officials and about council meetings—are both local and political. The only other importance rating that identifies a significant difference in readership is also of a political nature: analysis of national issues, ranked 11th. No other content rating produces a marked difference in the frequency-of-reading pattern, including entertainment fare and advertising content.

This analysis suggests that although small-town residents expect a wide variety of content in their newspapers, the daily readers among them turn to the newspaper for continuous local coverage and for political reporting and analysis—the traditional mainstays of most American dailies.

Table 3

Newspaper Readership by Expressed Importance of Types of Newspaper Content

At least of some importance:	Newspaper Readership: Not At All	Occasional	Daily
	Percent	Percent	Percent
News, features about local institutions			
No (N = 106)	11	17	72
Yes (596)	3	11	86
News about national or foreign events			
No (134)	13	23	64
Yes (567)	2	9	89
Weather information			
No (180)	11	32	57
Yes (521)	2	5	93
Details about disasters and crimes			
No (138)	6	17	77
Yes (563)	3	11	86
Ads about store sales			
No (179)	5	12	83
Yes (523)	4	12	84
Articles about area public officials			
No (175)	9	21	70
Yes (526)	2	9	89
Editorials or political commentary			
No (172)	10	22	68
Yes (527)	2	9	89
Announcements of religious and cultural events in town			
No (167)	6	20	74
Yes (535)	3	10	87
Accounts of town and county council meetings			
No (203)	9	20	71
Yes (499)	2	9	89
Announcements of local births, deaths, marriages			
No (200)	6	12	82
Yes (502)	3	12	85
Analysis of national issues			
No (207)	9	28	63
Yes (491)	2	5	93
Letters to the editor			
No (192)	5	11	84
Yes (508)	3	13	84
Advice features, personal and avocational			
No (205)	6	15	79
Yes (495)	3	11	86
Television schedule or movie listings			
No (233)	5	12	83
Yes (468)	3	12	85
Classified ads			
No (256)	6	13	81
Yes (445)	3	11	86
Sports news			
No (308)	7	13	80
Yes (292)	2	11	87
Business news			
No (364)	6	15	79
Yes (336)	1	10	89
Society, fashion news			
No (401)	5	14	81
Yes (296)	3	9	88
Items about private lives of celebrities			
No (405)	4	9	87
Yes (292)	3	16	81
Comics and cartoons			
No (458)	5	13	82
Yes (244)	3	11	86
Crossword puzzles or horoscopes			
No (493)	4	13	83
Yes (209)	4	11	85

The Demographics of Daily Reading

The more education and income a person has, the more likely he or she is a daily reader of a newspaper. Education is more closely related to daily readership than is income. There is very little difference among the higher-income brackets in their frequency-of-reading pattern; but theirs is quite different from the pattern of respondents of less than $6000 annual income.

Heads of households tend to read slightly less frequently than other household members, but length of residency in the town, summarized in Table 4 as 10 years or more and less than 10, is not predictive of reading frequency.

Table 4

Newspaper Readership by Personal Characteristics

	Newspaper Readership: Not At All	Occasional	Daily
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Formal Education:			
8 years or less (N = 132)	15	11	74
9-11 years (115)	4	18	78
12 years (164)	2	9	89
13-15 years (148)	2	15	83
16 or more (143)	0	8	92
Income:			
Under $6,000 (144)	16	15	69
$6,000-$9,999 (122)	3	14	83
$10,000-$19,999 (212)	1	12	87
$20,000 or more (149)	0	13	86
Sex:			
Female (401)	4	12	84
Male (301)	4	12	84
Status in Household:			
Head (362)	7	12	81
Member (340)	1	12	87
Residency in Community:			
Under 10 years (168)	5	13	82
10 years or more (535)	4	12	84
Leisure Time Available:			
Little or none (141)	1	13	86
Moderate (330)	2	13	85
Much (233)	9	11	80
Identification with Community:			
Low (184)	3	15	82
Medium (274)	2	11	87
High (246)	7	11	82
Interest in Civic Affairs:			
Low (267)	6	17	77
Medium (202)	3	9	88
High (235)	3	9	88

What is more, availability of free time does not seem to be a factor, either. In fact, the evidence suggests that those who regard themselves as having little or no time to call their own (no more than an hour a day) tend to read newspapers with greater regularity than those with more than eight hours of leisure time daily. This slightly negative association between leisure time and newspaper reading is attributable to the very old and the unemployed, who almost unanimously admitted having much free time but little inclination to read a newspaper.

Two indices devised for this study concern residents' orientation to their town. By itself, "identification with the community" is not very helpful in explaining why small-town people read a daily newspaper. "Interest in civic affairs" distinguishes only the low-interest residents from the rest of the community. At best, these two factors in isolation provide minimal insight into readership frequency.

Daily Reading and Media Orientation

It is the resident's orientation to the mass media rather than to the community that appears to be decisive, as Table 5 suggests. Daily readers rather than occasional or non-readers are more likely to be heavy users of all news media. Frequency of reading newspapers is correlated at least with the number of radio sets personally owned, the number of television sets found in the household and the range of magazines regularly read, including news magazines.

Only frequency of watching television is not positively related to newspaper readership. Somewhat to the contrary. Those who spend much time with television—more than 25 hours a week—are less likely to be daily readers than other television viewers. This category includes many of the very old and infirm, whose failing eyesight precludes much concentrated reading yet permits casual viewing of television.

How often people watch television news programs is correlated with how regularly they read a newspaper, but only if the reference is to network news. Presumably, residents who are satisfied with area television's sporadic coverage of their town feel less need to resort to the local newspaper regularly for its more comprehensive local reporting.

How much a person is willing to pay for a newspaper is a very practical indication of its worth to the single-copy buyer—or potential subscriber. Respondents were asked to react to two statements

Table 5

Newspaper Readership by Media Orientation

	Newspaper Readership: Not At All	Occasicnal	Daily
	Percent	Percent	Percent
MAGAZINES:			
Regular reading of			
none (N = 261)	9	16	75
one type (144)	2	10	88
several types (299)	1	10	89
Regular reading of news magazines			
no (592)	5	13	82
yes (112)	1	8	91
NEWSPAPERS:			
Household subscription			
none (107)	23	41	36
non-local only (40)	0	10	90
town newspaper only (271)	1	9	90
both kinds (281)	1	5	94
Personal subscription			
none (355)	8	20	72
non-local only (27)	0	11	89
town newspaper only (174)	1	5	94
both kinds (148)	0	2	98
Recent reading of a newspaper			
non (38)	68	29	3
non-local only (28)	0	36	64
town newspaper only (222)	1	17	82
both kinds (416)	0	7	93
Price of a copy of a newspaper "too expensive"			
agree (282)	7	16	77
disagree (397)	1	9	90
Price of a copy of town's newspaper "too expensive"			
agree (150)	12	28	60
disagree (542)	1	7	92
RADIO:			
Personal ownership			
none (28)	11	21	68
one (201)	9	15	76
two (175)	3	14	83
three or more (298)	2	8	90
TELEVISION:			
Household ownership			
none (14)	14	29	57
one (316)	6	11	73
two (273)	2	13	85
three or more (100)	2	11	87
Weekly viewing			
10 hours or less (168)	4	11	85
11-17 hours (185)	2	12	86
18-25 hours (171)	5	10	85
more than 25 hours (180)	6	15	79

	Newspaper Readership: Not At All	Occasional	Daily
	Percent	Percent	Percent
Weekly viewing of area TV news			
not at all (62)	5	8	87
less than 3 times (96)	3	15	82
three or more times (546)	4	12	84
Weekly viewing of network news			
not at all (50)	6	16	78
less than 3 times (92)	4	20	76
three or more times (562)	4	10	86
MEDIA PREFERENCES:			
Source of local news			
non-newspaper (174)	15	31	54
newspaper (268)	0	5	95
both sources (258)	1	7	92
Source of national and world news			
non-newspaper (352)	8	18	74
newspaper (81)	0	5	95
both sources (268)	0	6	94
Rating of newspaper compared with television			
low (217)	11	23	66
medium (260)	2	11	87
high (227)	1	3	96
Media enjoyment			
television viewing (396)	5	18	77
newspaper reading (256)	1	5	94
Content preference			
television (323)	7	18	75
newspaper (306)	2	6	92
Personal importance of content			
television (274)	8	17	75
newspaper (365)	1	8	91
Utility of the information			
television (226)	7	23	70
newspaper (433)	3	6	92
Thorough coverage of salient news			
television (318)	8	18	74
newspaper (355)	1	8	92
Treatment preference			
television (413)	4	15	81
newspaper (243)	2	7	91
Would 'miss' a newspaper, if unavailable			
No (140)	19	35	46
Yes (562)	0	7	93

relating to cost. One about newspapers in general ("Even considering the high cost of everything these days, copies of newspapers have become much too expensive") occurred early in the interview. Another, regarding the town's newspaper ("The little I get out of the local newspaper is not worth the 15 cents it costs to buy it"), appeared near the end. Though these cost statements were deliberately phrased in negative terms, almost 59 percent of the respondents considered newspapers inexpensive and more than 78 percent judged the town's newspaper "worth the cost." This economic factor is among the best predictors of daily reading encountered so far. Perceived worth of the local paper, in particular, shows a most significant contrast in readership patterns.

Media orientation means much more than use of the media, preferred news sources or even willingness to pay the price. It includes such factors as how beneficial people have found a particular mass medium to be in their past, how important it has become in their lives and even how favorably they look upon its presentations.

The daily-reading differences between those favoring television and those preferring newspapers are significant for each dimension measured, whether content preference, importance, utility, thoroughness, treatment or general enjoyment. The largest differences occur for thoroughness and utility, for which newspapers get the majority nod from small-town residents; the lowest difference is found in the treatment of content, for which newspapers receive the lowest rating.

When these media factors are combined with the personal characteristics already surveyed to determine not only which of them are the relatively better predictors of daily readership of newspapers, but also how well the combined factors properly distinguish between daily readers and the rest of a small town's residents, five factors emerge as significant.[1] In order of importance, they are:

- the reader's appraisal of newspapers as a helpful medium
- income
- identification with the community
- appraisal of newspapers as an enjoyable medium
- formal education

Implications and Recommendations

It should be of general interest to all publishers and editors—not only those of small-town newspapers—that the perceived *helpfulness* and *enjoyment* of newspapers figure so prominently in readership. For, unlike many other factors, these two are in no small degree controlled by them.

Enjoyment, however, is not to be narrowly construed as referring merely to popular presentation of content. Treatment preference of newspapers over television, it should be recalled, was the least powerful discriminator of readership patterns among the six dimensions on which the two media were rated. Reading enjoyment, if we accept the clues supplied by small-town residents in their most frequently volunteered press criticism and praise, could be enhanced by *large typeface, wide columns* and *few jumps.*

People also object to having to search for what they want from a newspaper. Not only should stories, if they must be continued on another page, be clearly and unmistakably identified as the continued articles in question, but *regular features, specific sections and recurring items of record should appear in designated and accustomed places daily* in the newspaper "and not moved around so much." All leading stories need not appear on the front page, so long as headline size indicates relative importance. Readers appreciate this clue to significance, as they exercise their prerogative of choosing what they want to read and ignoring the rest—"the American way of freedom of choice," as one respondent called it in praising the newspaper at the expense of television news.

The advantages of newspapers need to be publicized and emphasized more for the general public. The survey findings, as interpreted with the aid of responses to open-end questions, suggest that newspapers ought to *sell themselves better—and advertise more,* emphasizing their unique benefits.

The interview session seems to have been for many non-readers an occasion of learning and reflecting about newspapers. There was a growing realization during the questioning about the potential personal enjoyment and utility of the newspaper. This was reflected in the declining number of respondents who said newspapers are too expensive. But the education of the public regarding the personal worth of the contemporary newspaper should not be left to chance surveys of readership!

Certainly, newspapers should continue to emphasize their reporting advantage in providing more thorough coverage of local news. Identity with the community, after all, did finally emerge, in conjunction with perceived enjoyment and helpfulness of newspaper content and with two demographic factors, as a leading discriminator between readers and non-readers of newspapers. But the *local emphasis ought not to be at the expense of non-local coverage.* The evidence from this study suggests that a more expanded coverage of area, national and world events and issues would result in fewer subscribers to, and readers of, two or more newspapers among

small-town residents, to the benefit of the local newspaper.

What is the best mix—or whether there is a single formula—of editorial content is beyond the scope of the research reported here. But there is no denying that newspapers must be many things to all people if they are to survive and prosper.

■

Footnote

[1]Discriminant analysis was the statistical technique used.